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Dr. Hutton says that "The Hound of Heaven" has attained "a certain publicity rather than popularity." He believes that there is much of spiritual significance and fine mysticism in this and the other poetry of Francis Thompson and he gives here a splendid interpretation of the man and his work. He shows not only a knowledge of literature but also of the practices and foibles of literary criticism. In the light of this knowledge he studies the poems of Thompson as utterances which aid in a better understanding of the divine mysteries.

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GUIDANCE FROM FRANCIS THOMPSON IN MATTERS OF FAITH

WORKS BY

DR. JOHN A. HUTTON

The Tragedy of Saul
The Dark Mile
The Victory over Victory
That the Ministry be not Blamed
Ancestral Voices
There they Crucified Him
The Winds of God
As at the First
The Weapons of our Warfare
The Proposal of Jesus
If God Be For Us
Loyalty the Approach to Faith
Our Only Safeguard

Guidance from Francis Thompson in Matters of Faith

The Golden Book of Francis Thompson

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
Ltd., London

GUIDANCE FROM FRANCIS THOMPSON IN MATTERS OF FAITH BY JOHN A. HUTTON, D.D.

1868

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PREFATORY NOTE.

MANY years ago, the present writer made himself responsible for a little book bearing the title "Guidance from Robert Browning in Matters of Faith." That earlier book has had such a wide and friendly reception as to make it clear to him that there is a great company of people in these days who find help or confirmation face to face with life from the sincere interpretation of that travail of the soul which great poetry is.

St. Paul's House,
September, 1926.

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PROLEGOMENA

THROUGHOUT my ministry, during the winter months, I have conducted, week by week, a class for those who had leisure and inclination to attend. In that class we have discussed those most vital matters which hang about the frontiers separating —if they may be said to separate—religion from art, or religion from history, or religion from philosophy. It is not for me to suggest that those meetings were of value to those who regularly came together. I know that first and last they were of great value to myself.

That class has been my hobby, my refuge, my retreat. There, at any rate, I could be sure that those who were sitting before me—whether many or few —had indeed "come together," so that I never once failed to realise that where

two or three are *met together* there are more present than one can count with the natural eye. I took pains to make myself sure that those who gathered should indeed *come together*. For it was a habit of mine, after the first two or three meetings, to ask those who had discovered that they had come on a misunderstanding, or who were even in the least way bored, not to come back. I even pleaded with people not to come unless they liked to come or unless they were determined that they should like to come. The consequence was—and here we are on the edge of a profound disclosure of the human soul—a great many people did actually come and did actually continue to come. For, two things! One, we none of us like to be left out. We none of us like to feel that, so to speak, we are not "class" enough for a class that is going to study Browning, or Dante, or the Pre-Raphaelites. And this is not mere snobbishness. If this, indeed, were the matter in hand

at the moment, and if I had the time, I could show that this "envy," so to call it, which is provoked in us by seeing others seated at some "feast of the Lord," is an emotion on the universality of which the Gospel relies for its ultimate triumph. I am quite sure that we are altogether wrong in urging people or arguing with them to come in amongst us, and that it would be a more remunerative policy (even as a policy) so to heighten and sweeten our own esoteric and communal life that outsiders would become first (and this with increasing difficulty) contemptuous and superior, later abject and inferior, curious, envious, coming about like Nicodemus by night, and finally joining the ranks and asking for a turn with the flag. When one comes to think of it, it is the most preposterous thing in the world to be asking people to come into a place or a communion for which meanwhile they have no taste or appetite or conscious need. The function of the Church in the world

is to make life in this world a poor thing by comparison with a life which is yet to be revealed. You cannot answer a question until it has been asked: the asking of the question is nine-tenths of the answer. In fact, I would go so far as to say that there are no answers to questions—I mean the great questions as to the meaning of life. The only answer is—God: "It is by faith we understand." Our *one* business in these days, it seems to me, is to kindle a fire in this winter of our discontent; to create groups, gatherings, churches, compact minorities of those who have been provoked or driven by life to reflection, and, in a sense, leave it to the indestructible nature of the soul of man as God has made it—that is, to the Holy Spirit—to do the rest.

TWO POINTS IN PREFACE

No word of God is of private interpretation. There are elect personalities, it would appear, whose careers, whose very misgivings even, were all the time the

preparation for their seeing something, something which is always there, which we by the very evenness of our life may not be competent to see. Francis Thompson belongs to the order of substitutionary lives, of people, that is to say, who have been elected by Providence, by the dictates of their own nature, corroborated and confirmed by the exigencies of their outward life, to suffer and to come into secrets and to report. He belongs to the body of elected personalities whose poetry is no mere art but the expression and biography of their souls. Whatever place we may ultimately assign to Thompson in the world of letters, it is this election which gives him his authenticity in the life of thought, wherever thought is conceived of as man's final resource, his sling and round pebble with which, otherwise unarmed, he goes out to meet a universe that mocks him. A man whose writing is no mere trick, but the invincible and desperate expression of his own soul in order that he may live—if his words

have received the consecration of style—that is a man whose contribution will always be precious.

* * * *

Roughly speaking, and in the most general terms, we may say that there are two methods by which the spirit in man has thought to master its surroundings: one, to consecrate or sublimate things as they are; the other, to reject, to refuse, to stand apart lest our garments be defiled. The policy of the Christian Church for fourteen hundred years from the time of Christ—with the exception of the great ascetic movements of the East—was undoubtedly to consecrate things as they were. Especially was this the line which the genius of the Church took in the conversion of the Northern and Western peoples of Europe. She conserved all that was historical and human in the traditional attitude of the people towards life. The Church did not say, "All that you formerly loved and adored

was sinful, or was futile." The Church rather said, "In that former worship and adoration you were honouring something within yourselves which all the time was worthy of a loftier object. You were wont to worship the sun as the source of light and of heat and of the wealth of life: 'Whom ye ignorantly worship, Him declare we unto you.' The dawning of the sun each day, its triumph at the solstice over winter and the grave, all that was a symbol. It was Nature and your own soul in travail towards something which was later to be revealed."

* * * *

Someone, it may have been Thompson himself, has noted that in Paganism there is no allusion to such things of beauty as the human eyes, which are the spiritual index of the soul; that not until Dante did one confess that it was the eyes of a woman which dragged him from the abyss and made the sensual life intolerable.

* * * *

Christianity succeeded Paganism, that is to say, it supplanted Paganism. If Paganism had been an absolutely satisfactory system for human life and human thought, there is nothing in the world which could have unseated it. It would be wrong to say, or it would be an exaggeration, that Pan is dead. It is not wrong and it is no exaggeration to say that there is now abroad in the world—and Thompson was one of its purest exponents—a spirit which will always make naturalism uneasy, or shameful, or ridiculous. Faith has been described as the victory over the world. That is precisely the truth; by faith we know better.

It was men of the world who, according to the Book of Acts, came to the first Christians and asked, "What is this?" To them the early Church could radiantly reply, "This is—that!"

* * * *

But I am keeping Francis Thompson waiting. Fortunately, he is one of those

who can wait. But for the war he would now have been as potent over thought and as helpful to hard-working students, preachers, young men and maidens setting out upon life, as was Browning to an earlier time. But his day is coming, and I shall have miserably failed in what follows if I do not attract to the poet many who later will so talk "Thompson" to their friends that some will rate them a nuisance and others will owe to them their very soul. For of Thompson one may say with more truth even than of Browning that Christ is always over his shoulder.

* * * *

To propose to speak of "the poetry and message of Francis Thompson" is, of course, to provoke a smile and gesture of contempt on the part of the pundits. "Art for art's sake!" I hear. And "it is the very sign-manual of art that it shall have *no* moral aim." We shall deal with that position later. Meanwhile, I will only say that every supreme artist in

letters has had a message. I will only recall a saying of Wordsworth's in a letter to Lord Beauchamp: "I am a teacher or nothing."

"Ah, yes, Wordsworth! Of course, Wordsworth!" it will be objected. Well, then, what about Tchekov, that purest and most impersonal and disinterested of writers, and a modern? Listen to this from Tchekov: "All great writers have had an axe to grind!"

PERSONALIA

THERE is, of course, something true and indisputable in "Art for Art's Sake." One has only to recall the fatiguing moralisings of certain popular "religious" pictures to feel how necessary it is from time to time to recall an artist to his own business. One remembers the picture of a knight clad to the teeth in shining armour. Like France in 1870, he is ready for war to the last buckle! Everything is there—helmet, breastplate, and the rest. A fair woman is girding on a mighty sword, the knight meanwhile doing nothing but looking into the future with a tense eye and with a grimness which no mortal man could long sustain. The whole thing may be called "Faith." It is all right as a sermon; but it is all wrong as a picture. And on second

thoughts it is all wrong even as a sermon. Because that is not how temptation, or the insinuation of the lower view of life, comes to any of us. It is not when we are consciously armed to the teeth, our soul fortified by the near presence of a fair beloved one, that we come to be beset.

But take a painting of the high order. Take Millet's "The Man with the Hoe." Here is no preaching, no commentary. Here is simply a man, a peasant, resting from his hard work on sour soil, leaning on his hoe. I defy anyone to stand before that picture, even in a photogravure of it, without feeling its moral challenge and rebuke. The man is not preaching at you. He is not thinking of you. Perhaps he is not thinking of anything. He is simply *there.* But standing there, over the ankles in the upturned loam, looking up for a moment from his eternal task, he stops the passers-by, even as our blessed Lord in His agony assailed the passers-by so

that they beat their breasts and wondered what was coming to them and to the world!

Millet's "Man with the Hoe," without intending anything, effects this: he seems to say to us, "This is my work! This is the kind of way in which I try to pay my passage through life! What is your work? How do you repay the world for the pains it takes to keep you going?"

* * * *

Francis Thompson was born in Preston, Lancashire, in 1859, the son of a doctor. Like most fathers, Thompson's father decided that his son should follow in his footsteps, and practise medicine. Like most children of genius Francis Thompson thought differently. After school, where Thompson excelled in Classics, the father sent him to Owens College, Manchester, to "medicine." The father paid the fees, but the son did not attend the lectures. Later, Thompson was sent to

Glasgow University, where he studied with the same diligence ; he rarely visited the classroom. At last this arrangement came to an end. Thompson found his way to London, where he touched a depth of poverty which few people can realise even in imagination. For anything comparable to it we should have to reread some terrible page of Gorki. Fortune sometimes gave him a sickly smile, when Thompson would earn as much as sixpence at his job of holding a horse's head in the Strand !

But let no one make the mistake of pitying Thompson even there and then. He had meat to eat that the world knows not of. Standing there, holding a horse's head for a probable sixpence, it may very well have been that, in the sight of God, Thompson was the biggest man in the Strand ! For even then he bore about with him in a seedy coat in one pocket a volume of Blake, in another a volume of Æschylus, and all over him, hidden about his person, the edges

of newspapers whereon were written the very words which now the world hails as belonging to masterpieces of the spirit.

There was a day when Thompson touched bottom, and when God (shall we dare to say it ?) rushed to his assistance in an unlikely form, even as He sent the Magdalene to weep over the feet of Jesus. A poor girl of the streets was struck by Thompson's desperate appearance, thinking she saw in his eye that light which if not relieved leads a man to leap out of life by the forbidden door. She took him to her home. Later, after the Meynells and the world had discovered him, she left him. Before leaving she took his face in her hands and kissed him. And later, in the " Sister-Songs," Thompson declared that the kiss was as pure as another kiss which he celebrated —the kiss which " Silvia " Meynell gave him as a prattling child. If there is anyone who supposes that there was anything low in the desperate friend-

ship of that poor girl and this child of genius, and sniffs evil here, I must simply regard him as a lewd fellow of the baser sort.

"POEMS ON CHILDREN"

I SHOULD like to continue hanging about the threshold. For example, there is the portrait of Thompson painted in 1907 by the Hon. Nevill Talbot, which is of more value than many papers about him. What a combination of a vagabond (in the strict sense) and a saint, and how like Dostoievsky! I have just been turning over the cartoons of Max Beerbohm's latest volume, "Observations." Truly, what an uneasy thing it must be to be under such eyes! Perhaps some day, painting will become so psychologically efficient that it will displace biography. And so to give my very first quotation from Thompson, we may say with him,

> "Is it, if Heaven the future showed,
> Is it the all-severest mode
> To see ourselves with the eyes of God?
> God rather grant, at His assize,
> He sees us *not with our own eyes*."

It is one of the incredible and paradoxical things that a man like Thompson, with his temperament, his experience of the harshness of life—having "learned the worst too soon"—should have had the impulse to write about children with something of the innocence of a child. We should have supposed that comfortable people, people whom life had uniformly indulged, would in consequence have something good to say about life. Not a bit of it! Life has been condemned and cursed and disparaged almost always and only by people whose cup has been running over. I verily believe that the good man who poured out his soul in the Twenty-third Psalm, and who assured God that his cup was running over, was simply celebrating with the extravagance of an uncorrupted nature some tiny gift, some almost imperceptible relaxation of oppression, or of poverty, or of hunger. And, on the other side, who are they who have celebrated life and have thanked God for it, and have

seen angels ascending and descending to and from Heaven? Are they not men like Jacob, with his head on a boulder, and like Thompson on the Thames Embankment munching a crust, perchance, which he was able to buy with part of a holy sixpence earned at a horse's head in the Strand?

It is another of those paradoxes which keep the grass green and life a constant surprise, first, that Thompson should have written poetry at all; next, that he should have written about children; and again, that, having proposed to write about children, he should have written so convincingly, so innocently, so like a child. I know my Barrie and I know my Stevenson, and how they both visit the nursery. But, in my own view, what makes the poignancy of their observations on children is that they are not observations on children at all, but rather the yearning of men after something which life has not given them. They turn to children, as a Turgeniev pours out his

genius on young girls, because (at such moments at least) they regret our later and inevitable life.

Once again, it is a most remarkable thing that Thompson, of all that notable group of literary men who flourished and ripened and rotted amongst us about the 1890's, was the only one who had this consecrated eye for childhood. He tells his little godchild that when she leaves this world and reaches that other place she is not to waste time looking for him (Thompson) amongst the " bearded counsellors of God " ; that she is sure to find him " in the nurseries of Heaven."

To Thompson children were the manufacture and gift of God Himself—a beautiful result of the joint services of God Himself, and of Jesus, and of Mary, and of the angels.

* * * *

If you tell me what you think of children, I will tell you what kind of a person you are. And so it may have

been Thompson's function, in the great diplomacy of God, to restore the child ; to take a child (as did his Master) and place him in the midst.

> " Little Jesus, wast thou shy
> Once, and just as small as I ? "

There you have the daring and familiarity of children and of saints.

Thompson wrote many a heart-breaking poem over children, as he bethought himself : poems of the emotional quality of some of Coventry Patmore's. There is, for example, a poem of Patmore's in which he tells us how, irritated and impatient of a child of his, he had chastised him, " the mother being dead." How, later, weary and repentant, he had looked in upon the child, only to find him asleep with all his little toys, dogs, horses, soldiers, round about him to comfort his little heart in this puzzling world ! Thompson also can do that. But his distinction is that he can do the brighter, gayer thing.

POEMS ON CHILDHOOD

THE best children's sermon that I ever heard was one which I myself preached! But this is not immodesty or boastfulness. I took it verbatim from a book. My justification of the theft is so absolute that the memory of it has not darkened one moment in the life of my soul. There it lay, this exquisite thing in a wonderful book; but a book beyond the years of children. A book also out of the way of ordinary people. The quotation is, in fact, a treasure, and the wrenching of it from its hidden place was an act of piety. In Walter Pater's "Marius the Epicurean" there is a scene where Marius, a lad of ten or thereabouts, is on the eve of leaving home for school. His mother a widow: and Marius her only child! Now, what a terrible thing a human separation is, so

that there may be more than rhetoric in a saying of Jean Paul Richter's that in every human separation there is the taste of death.

But we must not allow ourselves to be too sad : especially this week*, when many of us are sad enough. Like Thompson, I shall pull myself together

> "Lest the songs I sing begin to be sad
> With the songs I do not sing."

In those desolate days before Christ came there was, you must remember, no New Testament, such as parents could give to their child as though to say, "There are a thousand things I should like to say to you ; but I cannot. You will find everything here." No "Daily Light" in those days ; no "Morning by Morning," no "Christian Year"! The fact is, there was almost nothing which we to-day would count worth while—nothing wherewith to meet and to sweeten the poignant moments of life. There they stood, the mother wishing to say

* November 5–12 : November 11 being Armistice Day.

something, she knew not what, and she knew not how. The boy only aware that he was at some parting of the ways. But mothers always know more than books can tell them; and the mother of Marius did wonderfully. She laid her hand upon the shoulder of her boy. *That*, at least, was all right. Supposing she had done nothing more, *that* was something. But God gave her something to say, and this was what she said. "Marius, a white bird which you are to carry across a crowded market-place without soiling its wings, your soul is like that!"

To Thompson, we had said, children were the gift of God. And this from his pen was no metaphor. It was, you might even say, a real, prosaic fact. Thompson said of real poetry—Dante is perhaps the only poet of whom you could say this without reserve—that poetry should have as its basis nothing high-falutin' or unreal; that a poet should be able to state in cold prose what lies at the basis of his poetry.

We shall never go far astray, or leave the middle of the path on God's great highway through life, so long as we remember that one age lives for the sake of the generation that is following; that we are not our own; that we belong not to our fathers only, but to our children. Some terribly clever people in our day propose to ease the congestion by keeping out children. But it might be a simpler way for such clever people to take themselves off in order to make room. When a ship has foundered, wherever there is chivalry, the first to be secured are the children.

Others who write about children attribute to them a complexity of feeling which we should be sorry to think as belonging properly to them. Many others —Barrie, Stevenson, Eugene Field, Patmore—ponder the ways of children as an escape from the maladies of later experience, even as a mother who has had a hard time will tell you that the happiest days she ever had were those

days when the children were all tucked in for the night, so that she could look at them sleeping, and slip out, and sit down.

In Ibsen, children are described rather as victims of fate, so that we see, looking out of their young eyes, things that are coming which make us afraid. Ibsen's children are ghosts indeed and nightmares.

But what a spendthrift of words I am. Read " Daisy " and you will forgive me.

Here are two verses, sad I fear, but ennobling, and striking a note on which I shall resume :

> " She went her unremembering way,
> She went and left in me
> The pang of all the partings gone
> And partings yet to be.
>
> " She left me marvelling why my soul
> Was sad that she was glad,
> At all the sadness in the sweet,
> The sweetness in the sad."

"A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM"

So said the great poet and prophet—poet because he was a prophet, prophet because he was a poet—of the Old Testament. I wonder if he meant the kind of thing that I am going to develop now. One never knows; and it is never safe to say what genius may not have perceived.

Let me recall two lines from the quotation with which we closed the preceding chapter:

> "She left me marvelling why my soul
> Was sad that she was glad."

There is a note we shall find everywhere in Thompson's poetry; and here at the outset. A delicate, poignant strain, the poet declares, for it was his own most personal experience, is put upon the soul

by the vision of something better, purer, finer than it had grown accustomed to. There is a terrible and more adult expression of this straining thing, in Emerson, who somewhere in effect says: "God help two people if one or other of them discovers that there is a higher way of loving than they have learned." This power which inheres in finer things arriving at the predestined moment, what is it indeed but the power of the living God? I remember reading long ago of some military student who discovered a ray of light having this quality, that, if it fell directly upon a bomb, it would cause the bomb to explode. I can well believe it; certainly that is true of the human heart.

"Speak the right word, and out leaps his soul."

And again:

"Just when we're safest, there's a sunset touch,
* * * *
And that's enough."

In fact, all the cards are in the hand of God.

What is it finally which lies at the back of that cry of the soul, giving to the soul of a man such sudden energy that, as none will deny who knows the story of the race, time and again the bars of iron have been burst asunder, and a man, breathless but radiant, has stood clear of some bondage which appeared invincible?

The Stoics declared that the sense of shame is the basis of all the virtues. There may be something of that in it. Though in my own view the basis of it is nearer to *envy*. On this point I would commend the poem entitled "The River," in the volume "Marlborough," by that youth of genius, Sorley. In that poem, he *envies* the River its force, its volume, its sense of a vocation, its unanimousness—in fact, all that we men do not have by nature, and never attain until a great affection "unifies our heterogeneous personality."

That also casts light upon the poignant

secret. There is shame and there is envy. There is more. I do not know how to describe this *more*, except to say that it is *a kind of terror lest we be left out*. "And the door was shut," said Jesus in His parable. Something went on, some blessed thing—and they outside. That is the intolerable condition.

Bunyan tells us that in his young days he was a great swearer. One day, standing beside two women of notoriously evil life, Bunyan uttered an oath. At this they shrank from him, and said, "Hush, you make me terrified," or something like that. Bunyan declares that it marked the obscure beginnings of an inner distress which was resolved only at the feet of Christ! Once upon a time—this later—when Thompson approached one of the Meynell children, it seemed to him that the child rather withdrew. Perhaps it was nothing. The child may not have been aware of any impatience or distaste. But to genius, a thing which might not touch us will be enough to cast a man

into hell. On that delicate incident, which may have had no basis except in his own imagination, the poet erected a whole system of theology. And indeed there is no other way of coming honestly by a personal theology than by accepting, fully and as just, those desperate judgments upon ourselves which are suggested by the behaviour of others towards us; and thereafter with prayer and fasting finding in *God* the right to hold up our head, and the conditions on which we may. You have this *motif* in "The Poppy," wherein we read of the poet and Monica Meynell walking hand in hand. And on the way the child plucked a poppy, put it into his hand and clasped hers in his with the poppy between. The child thought nothing of it; in the heart of the poet it let loose thoughts, yearnings, prayers as deep, and, but for something which sweetened them, as bitter as the sea:

> For *he* saw what she did not see,
> That—as kindled by its own fervancy—

The range shrivelled inward smoulderingly :
And suddenly 'twixt his hand and hers
He knew the twenty withered years—
No flower, but twenty shrivelled years.

EN ROUTE FOR "SISTER SONGS"

I HAVE come to know the workings of what I am in the habit of calling my mind. I warn my readers therefore that probably we shall do no more than travel towards "Sister Songs." I make no apology. The journey is the thing. The setting-out, the bustle, the settling-down in one's seat with the busy pretence that in a few minutes we shall be reading, when all the time we know we shall not. The idle gazing on the rushing fields, the cows at grass looking precisely as they did to Homer, who has described them so perfectly that we may say he has made it impossible for any one of us who have read a bit of the Iliad or of the Odyssey to see a cow for ourselves. I say, all this is the real thing: and if we deny it, we must conclude that we are getting old.

We are now out for *things*, food, rest, a destination; and are no longer satisfied simply to go on and on. In what follows we shall be *en route:* and *en route* for "Sister Songs": concerning which, with my own poor and incompetent approval, Mr. Garvin long ago bravely declared that in this particular class of poetry there had been two lonely achievements: Shakespeare's "Sonnets" and "Sister Songs" of Francis Thompson, with which should be read as an organic whole "The Hound of Heaven," adding "there is no third." Since all the divine things go by "threes" and "sevens," I should on reflection add some autobiographical sonnets of Dante; and, indeed, if I do not move away from this spot, I shall have to interview some other candidates.

* * * *

"Sister Songs" was written in 1891, in the same year as "The Hound of Heaven." The poet we read in Mr. Meynell's Biography left the MS. as a

surreptitious Christmas gift on a mantelshelf in the Meynell home.

" Sister Songs " was received by the pundits with a pitch of hostility which is to us to-day, unintelligible. For a parallel we have to go back to the *Edinburgh Review's* masterpiece over Wordsworth. " He has done more harm to the English language than American newspapers ! " " Defiler of the purity of the English language ! " Perhaps that is enough. Thompson was not without spirit, and turned briskly upon his detractors. He defended many of his words as already in the vocabulary of Shakespeare or other Elizabethans—Drayton, for example, and Cowley.

But " Sister Songs " had its enraptured friends : chief among these Mr. Garvin, who on the staff of the *Newcastle Chronicle* hailed the new star in the sky. " As to Francis Thompson, what strange indentures bound him to the muse we cannot tell. We are permitted to guess some strict and sad apprenticeship paid,

with bitter bread and unimaginable dreams, this ultimate deliverance of song."

* * * *

A man who wrote so exquisitely about children—having such reverence for their innocence—was a man who was likely to write with tact and reticence of the age which follows childhood. This he has done in "Sister Songs." The "Sisters" are Silvia and Monica Meynell.

Here one pauses for a moment to celebrate one of the most beautiful incidents in literature: how Wilfrid and Alice Meynell were the instruments, under God, for the redemption of Thompson.

There were two girls in the Meynell home—Silvia and Monica. You might say all in a word, and have it that the poet was in love with these children and with their mother. You may say *that* if you yourself are worthy. You may say it if you mean by love that

> "Lyric Love, half angel, and half bird,
> And all a Wonder and a wild desire."

You may say it if you understand " love " in his case to mean what Giuseppe Caponsacchi declared to his sniggering judges was the quality of his love for Pompilia. " Sirs, this is not lōve, this is faith."

" I know
I, too, am taintless, and I bare my breast."

These two children used to play with Thompson, they thinking little of it ; he registering in his sensitive soul earthquakes, revolutions, apocalypses at the touch of their hands, or the glance of their eyes ! He, hailing, in the dark context of his life and ours, their " face of dawn " as his " omen " of Christ and of God, and of life's delayed but inevitable truth ! The tiny hands of these children touching his eyes caused the scales to fall, and left him not with them, but with God !

* * * * *

The " Proem " in an invocation, not to any of the pagan nine, but to Mary,

the mother of Jesus! How well it would have been and would even now be for us all, were those who presume to deal with the souls of growing girls to submit what they propose to say, to the Virgin; and were they to commit to the flames everything from which she seems to avert her face!

SISTER SONGS

THE two poems which form "Sister Songs" are, like Shakespeare's "Sonnets" and Dante's "Divine Comedy," autobiographical, recording, that is to say, the spiritual events in the soul of a sensitive man of genius. To taste the full flavour of them one must be younger than, alas, I am. For our poet must catch us before we have settled our own emotional business: and the formula for the romantic movement in great literature is that we see God and truth by the light and sensibility of an emotional strain.

* * * *

Our interest in these studies is not purely a literary one, in some ways not a literary one at all. We are on the

look-out all the time for ideals, points of view, the reactions of an elect mind upon human experiences such as have touched us all—sin, love, failure, the approach of death. We want to make clear to ourselves how such a man bore up and found a solving word for those things in life which tempt us or embarrass us, or bring us to a standstill.

Those of my readers who have an interest in the more literary aspect of the poems will do well to work at these two in detail. My own advice in reading a difficult bit of verse is—to read it, first, right on to the end, understanding what is intelligible, and, to begin with, not worrying at all about lines, phrases, allusions whose meaning escape you. Again and again things are clearer from the end looking back—as we hope and believe the great drama which our own life is, will be.

For myself, in the earlier poem, on "Little Sylvia," I am content to let a very great deal go by, and to attend

exclusively to the exquisite portion beginning

> " Once, bright Sylviola ! in days not far,
> Once—in that nightmare time which still doth haunt
> My dreams, a grim, unbidden visitant—
> Forlorn and faint and stark,
> I had endured through watches of the dark
> The abashless inquisition of each star,
> Yea . . ."

In fact, we have a tender story, told with reticence but without shame. The point was, little Sylvia had kissed the poet ; or, to put it with a stricter psychological description, little Sylvia had *given the poet a kiss.* And here he tells her that in his sad and bruised life once before he had been kissed—by a poor girl. She had kissed him good-bye, when she knew that his necessary poverty was over, that he had friends " who would never understand." He never saw her after that. As de Quincey looked for Anne he looked for that girl who had befriended him.

"A child; like thee a spring flower; but a flower
Fallen from the budded coronal of spring.

. . . . . .

She passed . . .

. . . . . .

Therefore I kissed in thee
The heart of childhood, so divine for me.

. . . . . .

All vanished hopes, and all most hopeless bliss
Came with thee to my kiss.
And ah! so long myself had strayed afar
From child and woman, and the boon earth's green—"

. . . . . .

But I will quote no more. It is a passage for young, warm-hearted people—whose branch of life is green—to commit, thereby harnessing for higher things their deepest powers. It is also a passage for those of us who are over the crown of the hill to make as much of as we can.

The justification of a kiss, and of the whole emotional impulse, is—that it projects our spirit towards some achievement which otherwise we should never even have perceived. Thompson has repaid the world for that child's kiss.

There's many a dainty poem on a "kiss." There's Leigh Hunt's

> "Jenny kissed me when we met,"

and there's Browning's

> "All the breath and the bloom of the year in the bag of one bee."

The philosophy of the matter you will find in Browning's Ferishtah's Fancies, in the poem "Plot-Culture."

A timid student of theology confesses to his teacher that he had kissed his sweetheart Laila. To whom the teacher answers in effect: "I don't want to know any of your private affairs. Kiss Laila, who I trust may make you a good wife one day—only remember Doomsday!"

"DEEP calleth unto deep." For those who have interest enough in these studies to make the most of them, I can recommend a delightful and not exacting task. Compare the language which this poet uses to celebrate the romantic leap to the breast of God, with the language used by Dante, and by Robert Browning, to describe the same shaking moment. Dante tells us that when he first met Beatrice as a child of nine he saw something in her which shook him to the depths of his being, so that he declared that the whole "Divine Comedy" was but the working out of forces of moral indignation and revenge, dreams, purposes, raptures—all of which had been let loose within him by something which was innocence as much as it was beauty, something certainly

which was purged of all desire and was nearer to faith than to love.

The classical passage in Browning, I suppose, will be the speech of Giuseppe Caponsacchi, upon whom Browning surely pours out his precious box of ointment. Caponsacchi does not try to explain how the thing happened or why it should happen precisely so. He simply declares that he saw Pompilia—pale, frail, sad—and the bars of iron were in a moment burst in sunder. It was as though a garment caught at the neck had been loosened and had fallen *at once* to the ground. For in the case of men of this passionate type there is no twilight before sunrise; one moment it is dark, next moment it is day.

Thompson tells us that he had long forgotten the delicate things of the heart, and the power inherent in sheer innocence, like the touch of a hair-trigger, to let loose an explosion and a fire, when he himself became the blessed victim of the kiss of a child.

" From childish lips' unvalued precious brush "
(he learned)
" . . . how it makes the sudden lilies push
Between the loosening fibres of the heart."

We shall meet all this later, for it is something which the poet returns to again and again, as though he himself was determined to get to the bottom of such a subverting and reconstructing experience—we shall meet it all again in the second and maturer of the Sister Songs.

* * * *

The age in which Thompson lived had given itself—beginning with Pater—to the quest of *sensation*. In that search for sensation many of the poet's contemporaries, not Pater—I have always resented the injustice of coupling Pater with the decadents who indeed adopted his formula but had themselves nothing of his ascetic spirit—many of them ended in despair. Starting from the position that sensation is the object and justification of life, they said: let us not wait for sensations, let

us seek them out. But we can see how *that* road, if we abandon moral scruple and slip the collar of a religious faith, will lead to the pit. Almost everyone who figured in that movement either ended in prison or in a suicide's grave or by the grace of God was converted to Christ. One went, like Yeats, into theosophy; another, like Beardsley, found his peace in the Church of Rome, uttering in his death-agony a great and exceeding bitter cry.

* * * *

Where then is Thompson's place in this philosophy or fashion of sensationalism? In Thompson's view and experience the great sensation is never in the fulfilment of desire, but in the restraint of desire out of respect to something which seems still more desirable. The finest sensation, he would have said, is secured not by the way of indulgence but by the way of self-control and reticence. He celebrates in many a poem the joy of *not*-having—of not-having-seen, of not-having-known. This is an insight with

an enormous and substantial basis in human experience. Certainly nothing was ever so good as was the promise of it. There's a flatness about all attainment, so that in such an hour a man knows that his soul is somewhat diminished. There is something about achievement of which one is secretly ashamed. Even a pagan like Goethe confessed : " I hate luxury ; it destroys the imagination." And the humblest preacher dealing with Jacob at Bethel has never omitted to observe quite truthfully that the great dreams have visited those who meanwhile had for a pillow a stone.

Let us indeed confess quite heartily that the great hour is the hour when the soul is moving from one state into another ; a time therefore of stir, of insecurity, of strain. Nietzsche said that the great hours are those in which some bondage is broken and we are heading for freedom. But such a statement requires a careful handling by anyone who is liable to succumb to any bright little formula

for life. For the soul of man has had great hours also when, on the other hand, it suddenly hated its so-called freedom, and returned to some bondage dearer than freedom. St. Paul begins almost every Epistle with "Paul, the slave of Christ": it is his way of saying "Hallelujah!"

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SISTER SONGS

We pass to the second of the "Sister Songs," addressed to the elder child "Monica," and stirred to expression by her.

The great moments of the soul, we were saying, are the moments of transition. This may be a transition to liberty from a condition of supposed bondage. But the lyrical impulse may with as much likelihood be let loose by a transition from a condition of "liberty" to some blessed state of bondage: as when Cleopatra confessed "'Tis sweating labour to bear such idleness so near the heart." Perhaps the truth is that we are made for bondage; but it must be bondage to something which moves or to someone who lives. It may be that the soul of man has not one centre only, but two: its

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own eternal entity, and—God. Certainly they are deceiving themselves who think to catch man for ever within a formula and a fixed institution—however good.

It would appear that the moral and emotional world is a round world, so that when one goes away beyond a point he begins to come home. A point beyond due East begins to be more properly called West. There is the transport of the Marseillaise, and there is the transport of a saint bound hand and foot to Christ. The thing common to both is the condition of strain. Strain is the word to use for something poignant; and it is the word we use for a song. "Who taught thee to sing?" asks someone in Ibsen's "Pretenders." "God sent me sorrow!" is the answer. Not sorrow merely, you observe, but sorrow perceived as from God.

* * * *

"In pairing-time, we know, the bird
Kindles to its deepmost splendour,
And the tender
Voice is tenderest in its throat."

Thompson may have been reserved by a patient providence to lead the generation which is now on the threshold of youth and maidenhood back to something like the old philosophy : the philosophy of simplicity and restraint as the method of life and power. " A man's reach must exceed his grasp," said that earlier poet whose sources are astonishingly hard by the springs of Thompson's poetry and philosophy. Man lives by unrealised ambitions. He has a spirit above things. The first time I went to Niagara I could not see the Falls for quite a perceptible space of time. I looked for them where my imagination, accustomed to immensities, had placed them, and was searching for water falling from the sky !

Note the passage, called in the book of " Selections " " The Omen," beginning :

" Yet is there more, whereat none guesseth,
Love ! "

There the poet celebrates the day when the love of human beings brought to

him the great corroboration of the Love of God. How he lay like some monster of the deep on the bank,

> " not yet discerning well
> If I had 'scaped or were an icicle
> Whose thawing is its dying."

He was at the stage of sheer amazement and dislocation, one world dead within him, the other struggling to be born :

> " Then, as flies scatter from a carrion,
> Or rooks in spreading gyres like broken smoke
> Wheel, when some sound their quietude has broke,
> Fled, at thy countenance, all that doubting spawn ;
> The heart which I had questioned spoke,
> A cry impetuous from its depths was drawn—
> ' I take the omen of this face of dawn ' !
> And with the omen to my heart camest thou ;
> Even with a spray of tears
> That one light draft was fixed there for the years ! "

If we know what the poet is saying and what he is meaning *there*, we know him altogether. There is finally only one thing to be known about a man. The greater

the man is the more solitary and outstanding is his fundamental experience. " One thing I know," so they have all declared who came out of darkness into light. This is Thompson's one only thing :

" I take the omen of this face of Dawn ! "

Ponder the words, and as commentary upon them take these :

" As the innocent moon, that nothing does but shine,
Moves all the labouring surges of the world " ;

and this :

" Thou wert to me that earnest of day's light " ;

and this :

" A sight like innocence when one has sinned,"

all leading up to some such a thing in Holy Scripture as :

" And Jesus turned and looked upon Peter, and Peter remembered."

"THE OMEN" IN SISTER SONGS

THE chief objection that critics had to Thompson's poetry—and "Sister Songs" let it loose—is an objection which has something to say for itself. He does use singular words, curious words, heavy and languorous words, rich, extravagant, Oriental-looking words, of which we feel that we do well to be suspicious. All great writers who have had a passage of their career blasted by opium seem to carry this mark to the grave—Coleridge, De Quincey, Thompson. In the case of Thompson—it seems to me—this malign influence steadily leaves his verse, which later gains simplicity. Apart from all that, it is simply the truth that every man who comes before us with a *new* word has to make for himself an audience: he has to depend first upon little groups of

enthusiasts who while they may not themselves, at the outset, understand their hero, have pledged themselves to stand by that hero in his darkest and most unintelligible hours. Browning came at length into his kingdom through such groups everywhere, groups of men and women who even bored their friends and suffered reproach that the name of their illuminator might not perish from the earth. Thompson's words are often puzzling and even baffling. Maurice Hewlett (as a kind friend in a pleasant letter once informed me) declared that if a man were left on a desert island with "In Memoriam" and "The Hound of Heaven," in a few days' time he would have "In Memoriam" by heart, and the other he would at an earlier stage have cast into the sea. That may be true; and yet such a man would have been wrong there, and later, if, as we all hope, he was rescued from that desert island and encountered Thompson's army of the living God on the march through that great

poem, like the bereft English king, he would never smile again !

To continue. We were dealing with the lines, and what lies behind them :

" I take the omen of this face of dawn !
And with the omen to my heart cam'st thou."

On this romantic and chivalrous level of human love, all that is necessary is that there be an object which provides an occasion for the outpouring of a man's heart. The whole world of love, as it were, is already in the heart of the man ; all that is needed is something—Browning's " sunset touch, a fancy from a flower-bell, someone's death, a chorus-ending from Euripides," or (elsewhere) a " moulted feather, an eagle feather "—something, anything beautiful in itself—to let loose the blessed flood.

In this *ambiguous world*—to quote a word from Alice Meynell—the face of Monica settled Thompson's soul on the side of faith.

For, let it be frankly admitted, in this

world there are adverse and conflicting signs. There is much that encourages us to believe; there is much—it may even be there is more—which disposes us to deny. The decisive thing in the life-history of each of us is, that some occasion shall arise in our life when we suddenly feel with our whole being that the faith-view and not the denial-view is for us the very truth. We attribute to this higher interruption such a value that henceforward we pronounce judgment upon ourselves according to our loyalty or failure in loyalty towards that glancing thing. This idea is taken up again in the immediately succeeding section: "The Mirage."

> As an Arab journeyeth
> Through a sand of Ayaman,
>
> . . . . . .
>
> His weary stare.—,
> Sees . . . . . .
> Set in a silver air
> Fountains of gelid shoots are
> Making the daylight fairest fair;
> Even so

Its lovely gleamings
Seemings show
Of things not seemings ;
And I gaze,
Knowing that, beyond my ways,
Verily,
All these *are*, for these are She.

Here we have the picture of a man going through a desert suffering intolerable thirst. Suddenly, as he looks up and away, he sees in front of him what looks like an oasis. There clearly are the palm-trees and the water. Perhaps he even knows that it is a mirage. What then ? Would it be better not to have had such a vision, since later it may disappoint him ? No ! says the poet. And besides, to introduce more philosophy, the question is not, is it better or worse ? The fact is, man is so made that passing through the desert he sees this teasing, stimulating thing ; it is part of the final truth of his nature that he is liable to such delicate and shaking disturbances.

It is a mirage, maybe : a mere mirage. But when you are dealing with the soul

of a man, you must never call anything a *mere* this or a *mere* that. In the generosity of his uplifted mood, a man may confess that life is not a *mere* desert since it can let loose such dreams.

"In all I work, my hand includeth thine!"

Monica was but a child. She could not give the poet advice or even sympathy. Her service to him was that by being herself she opposed an effectual barrier to any low or merely mechanical view of life. Any theory of life which he might hereafter embrace would have to take account of the fact that life had produced for him its "Monica." That was for him the fact: the rest, the conflicting things, were at the worst mere circumstance.

> "This fragile song is but a curled
> Shell outgathered from thy sea
> And murmurous still of its nativity."

One might apply to all Browning's re-

deeming women—Pauline, and Pippa, and Phene, and Pompilia, what Thompson says here of Monica :

" As the innocent moon that nothing does but shine
Moves all the labouring surges of the world."

Both poets, like all Romanticists, celebrate the power of goodness, the terrible rebuke to our adult life which comes from the light of " innocence " : what perhaps the New Testament conveys in its phrase " the wrath of the Lamb."

" Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

Not true, my fellow-poet ! says Thompson, and says Browning. No flower ever blushed unseen. A perfume therefore was never wasted on the desert air. Perhaps beauty could not be, unless there was an Eye beholding it. Perhaps flowers get their very beauty from the reflection of God's face contemplating them. Perhaps their very blush is their consciousness of the divine appreciation.

The phrase " murmurous still of its nativity " is a reminiscence from Wordsworth. Wordsworth has a poem of a child holding a shell to his ear and listening to the roaring of the waves of the sea from which it came. So, within our soul, we hear the sound of breaking water ; and thus it is that " in a season of calm weather, though inland far we be, our souls have sight of that immortal sea which brought us hither."

Here the poem suddenly *deepens*. The poet looks forward to the inevitable day when this child " whose sex is meanwhile in her soul " shall become aware of a stirring which announces her approaching womanhood.

Nothing could be more exquisite, more discreet and reticent and *true*. Were I mistress of a girls' school and felt that I must in some way unveil to those young people under my charge the mystery of nature, I should ask girls of fourteen and thereabouts to read the poem from this point to the end, and to consult me

privately about any difficulties in the understanding of it!

The entire poem here has the effect for me of Burne-Jones' pictures, where, as it seems to me, the artist is seeking to break the news of life's later seriousness and danger and depth to young girls.

Thompson speaks of the lurking woman in Monica being meanwhile defended, held back, enveloped in a kind of protective sheath, lest it should come to a too early expression of itself. This essential womanhood is doomed to come to consciousness; but it is well that it should come slowly, pushing its way through one medium of opposition, transmuting that medium; confronting a later opposition and transmuting it in turn; even at the last being content to be still, until it is appealed to by something sympathetic in another, something which does no violence to the earlier sanctities. Thompson declared that poetry should not hint at anything which cannot be

stated in prose. This, then, is what he has to say on a matter in which poetry, rather than prose, seems to be the fit language of instruction. There are those who believe that knowledge is a safeguard; and there are those who believe that ignorance is a safeguard up to a certain stage. The necessary truth seems to be that by some means and until the nervous system is somewhat settled, there should be reticence. This temporary limitation in the earlier stage is a necessary constituent of the later womanliness.

> " The splendent sun no splendour can display
> Till on gross things he dash his broken ray."

> " Did not obstruction's vessel hem it in,
> Force were not force, would spill itself in vain.
> We know the Titan by his champed chain."

* * * *

In short, there are two ways in which water may come from a vessel: it may

run out, or it may run over. The water of life must gather, before it overflows, so that it may bear in all its later course certain ingredients of law and conscience.

SISTER SONGS

In a time like his own and ours when human nature is being encouraged to break loose in all directions, Francis Thompson raises his voice to support the ancient wisdom. It has become his function in the recent diplomacy of God to recall us all to the glory of the Cross ; to the light-heartedness and simplicity of the obedient life. To those who declare that man's chief end is secured by " letting-go," by yielding heartily to instinct, thereby recovering the " innocence " of dumb animals, Thompson would, in effect, say : " But was it not for that very reason that we ventured to call animals ' lower ' ; and as for yielding to instinct, there you beg the question. For our hypothesis, or faith, or final prejudice, is that man's deepest instinct is to put the curb upon

the ' lust of the eye and the pride of life.' " It all comes to the question : What is the characteristic and decisive thing about man ?

Now in seeking for the characteristic and decisive thing in any object—a house, a ship, a picture, a poem, a human being, you do not help me if you simply tell me the points in which that house, ship, picture, poem, human being is like all other houses, ships, etc. But if you can tell me even one thing in which it differs from other things which in many ways are like it, you immediately engage my attention and inform my mind. If—describing someone about whom I have inquired of you—you tell me that he has two legs, two arms, two eyes, you tell me nothing. Whereas if you drop me the hint that he has a cast in his eye, and that it is the right eye—why, I can almost see the man. William James pauses in one of his chapters to approve of the sagacity of a working-man who once remarked to him that there is not much difference

between one man and another, but that what there is is very important! *A fortiori*, there is perhaps not much difference between some carefully chosen man and some carefully chosen ape, but what there is is the decisive thing: because it is in fact the differentiating thing. An animal has certain instincts, and its true life consists in obedience to these. Man (at least, this is the view of faith) has many—almost all—of those very instincts, and yet it would be his ruin and disgrace to obey them without qualification, without control. And if that be so, then this idea of "control" which haunts man is itself man's true sign. His, in short, is the way of the Cross.

Thompson's very genius lies in his perfect perception of this. And not in any difficult or reluctant perception of it; but in the lyrical and even abandoned celebration of it. Take this, from "To a Poet Breaking Silence":—

> "Ah! let the sweet birds of the Lord
> With earth's waters make accord;

Teach how the crucifix may be
Carven from the laurel-tree,
Fruit of the Hesperides
Burnish take on Eden-trees,
The Muses' sacred grove be wet
With the red dew of Olivet,
And Sappho lay her burning brows
In white Cecilia's lap of snows."

* * * *

Though we have not yet mentioned "Sister Songs," and we are proposing here and now to leave it behind, we have all the time been dealing with the very marrow of it.

The personality which lies in the soul of Monica, one day to become self-conscious and carrying its fate in its hands, is meanwhile being created by the very resistances which law and wise love alike impose, and is being formed, strengthened, made resilient by the more or less enforced postponement of "liberty" and display.

* * * *

Alas!—and here is the pathos of the poem—a day will come when there will

be a knock at her door, a knock which she will mysteriously recognise.

"From the hovering wing of Love
The warm stain shall flit roseal on thy cheek."

And Thompson, to reduce his gorgeous and yet precise language to my own miserable and even petty prose, says things like this : " Monica ! never admit to your life a human love which darkens the sky for you, or confuses for you your sense of God.

" Therefore, little tender maiden,
Never be thou overladen
With a mind whose canopy
Would shut out the sky from thee."

Somewhere your designated Lover is on the way, and it would be a sad thing to meet him with a vast regret. For at the door of a maiden's heart hangs a horn which none can blow save the appointed one.

Elsewhere Thompson would say that the appointed one may stand outside the gate, having the form of a man, or having the form of the Son of Man.

If the bell rings, making the torches leap to flame, and the very stones and windows glow with warmth, so that "the far intricacies" of the spirit are thrilled—it is he, or it is He.

"THE HOUND OF HEAVEN"

"THE HOUND OF HEAVEN" is the poem by which most people on being challenged would claim to have some acquaintance with Francis Thompson. It is not unlikely that, if the matter were gone into there and then, it would be found that in many cases the acquaintance had not reached very far beyond the mere title of the poem! I do not say this harshly or with a superior air. The fact is, "The Hound of Heaven" is as difficult as anything the poet ever wrote. On its first appearance, Mr. D. H. Traill (whose business, so to speak, was literature) declared: "A public to appreciate 'The Hound of Heaven' is to me inconceivable." The explanation of a certain publicity perhaps rather than popularity to which this poem has attained, is doubtless that the

title is a simple and straightforward one. The general symbolism also is very easily stated and expounded by one who knows the poem even a little to another who may not know it at all. Most of us have seen a hound. Even if we have not seen a veritable hound, we have seen some kind of breed of lanky dog. Most of us also have seen a hare, or, short of a hare, a rabbit. Many of us have played some kind of game of "hounds and hares," and know the idea of such a game. It is enough, therefore, to say that in this poem Thompson makes use of the general idea of "hounds and hares," of "pursuit"; and when one goes on to say that, in his poem, the hound is God, and the hare is the soul of a man—why, even the dullest of us begins to have an inkling of what it is all about. And the feeling we have, the feeling which rises immediately such an idea is presented to us, and received, is the very feeling which the poem, on its later and most profound understanding, confirms within us.

The truth is that this metaphor of " God and the soul " which Thompson, and not Thompson alone, makes use of is one of those profound lights, or solving words, which, used resolutely, can be made to unravel every mysterious experience or baffling condition in life. Now, it is a great thing to have some working formula as to the whole meaning of life—as to its intention and method. For life is plastic : that is to say, it is amenable to interpretation. And it is a great thing to have, as one's personal clue, some saying, or idea, or point of view, which seems to be confirmed by ninety-nine things out of the hundred. For one is surely lacking in generosity and spirit who, leaping ninety-and-nine barriers, is appalled by one.

This idea of " flight and pursuit " is something which has haunted us all in dreams ; and in these days when we are assured that the last thing to say about any dream is that it is *idle*, this particular disclosure out of the depths of

the soul may have for many a new authority.

* * * *

And now to come nearer to this particular poem. One might quote St. Augustine: "Thou wast driving me on with Thy goad, so that I could not be at rest until Thou wast manifest to the eye of my soul." *There* you have the very idea, and the very paradoxical form in which it always expresses itself. God driving a man on with a goad, and the man feeling in the depths of his soul that he is being driven by God, not (as we might suppose) away from God, but is being driven by God to God. It is the idea underlying the deep phrase in the 139th Psalm, about God being "behind and before" a man, at the same moment.

Then, nearer to the very picture which Thompson's poem leaves finally upon our minds, we have the saying of Meister Eckhart: "He who will escape Him only runs to His bosom."

But the truth is that here, as elsewhere, you will always get the final exposition of a genuine mood or posture of the soul in that great Handbook of the heart and flesh of man, which the Bible is. All that Thompson saw finally, and saw, by the way, in "The Hound of Heaven," we have in the 139th Psalm. The man who wrote that Psalm almost discovered for himself that any world which God made was likely to be a *round* one, so that the farther a man goes in one way the nearer he is to coming home. He did discover that though he might take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, so far as escaping God was concerned, he might as well have stood his ground. He discovered also that if he tried to bury himself, rushing not so much along the surface of the earth, but digging down into it seeking to lose himself in the darkness, even so he had the terrible feeling that the world was in a kind of league with God to deliver him up and "to prate of his whereabouts."

" To be the poet of the return to Nature is somewhat ; but," says Thompson, " I would be the poet of the return to God." " The Hound of Heaven " is his most pointed and deliberate description of that journey to which every man is destined or is doomed.

" THE HOUND OF HEAVEN "

LITERATURE is life ; great literature is the treatment of life " in extremis." And so deep calleth unto deep.

Thus one great poem is illuminated by another. The best preparation for the easy and intelligent reading of " The Hound of Heaven " is to take a walk up and down one of the great psalms : the 139th, for example ; or the 32nd. Recall the 32nd Psalm, with its lyrical and explosive outburst : " Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile." Whereupon the good man proceeds to tell us what it is that has made him so excited and so happy. It appears that he had done something wrong, or it may have

been that he suddenly perceived that his whole way of living had been wrong. Well, then, what did he do with himself? He tells us: and a very modern story it is. *He pretended that it was nothing.* "He kept silence." He went about his business. Perhaps he read some book which was in circulation in his day, written with the very purpose of proving to sensitive and compunctious people that they are taking themselves too seriously! A book which recommended men not to indulge such introspection, not to wind themselves up too high; but rather to relax, to take a change; "Mens sana in corpore sano," which seems to myself to be the only Latin that the devil knows.

Well, he tells us in his own way that he had tried all that, and that he was in no way relieved. In fact, in describing how he felt under this treatment, language fails him, so that any cool and detached reader with a smattering of literary knowledge could convict this man of the breach of both grammar and sense. "When I

kept silence my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long." He became a sick man, poisoned in his bodily functions by an obsession or fixed idea. He tells us further that he lost his playfulness, his resiliency, his humour. For that, I take leave to think, must be the meaning of " my moisture is turned into the drought of summer." He became heavy, solemn, threatening. No really good man could be so serious as he looked !

At this stage, in the Authorised Version, we have the word Selah ! I used to make merry over an innocent man who once preached on the word " Selah." For in my callow days I knew that in a sense it is not a word at all, but only a musical direction or something of the kind. At the moment I feel that " Selah " is one of the great words of Holy Scripture. For " Selah " means, so to speak, " Look here, we have had enough of that." It means also, " Thanks be to God there is something more to be said about life and about the soul." " Selah " is what

Browning means when he makes Pompilia speak about the darkness deepening and deepening until everything is so dark that she is sure a star is just about to be born. At verse 4 in Psalm xxxii the star appears. "I acknowledged my sin" . . . There is nothing new in responsible psycho-analysis.

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To bring this entire matter of the Thirty-second Psalm under the very idea or metaphor of "The Hound of Heaven" we may put it all in this way:

Once upon a time there was a man —Everyman—who had done wrong or a wrong. Whereupon he tried to hide the wrong. And quite right too! It may not be a very high course—to do wrong and to try to hide it; but it would be the sign of a more hopeless condition if a man, having done wrong, were to flout it and boast of it! Like a normal human being, having done wrong this

man tried to hide it. He found that he could not hide it. The wretched thing was as good a runner as he. In fact, it kept looking over his shoulder as though IT had breath and to spare, while he was panting. Now we might wonder that a man in such distress could do any thinking at all; but the fact is that he could, and that we all can. With this thing pursuing him, just like Thompson's "Hound," the poor hunted man worked out an entire theological and evangelical system. And far from this being strange, perhaps it is the only way.

In a flash he saw everything and anticipated everything that the great evangelicals from St. Paul to Wesley have celebrated. Here am I trying to hide my sin *away from* God! I am right in trying to hide my sin; but most evidently this is not the way! Whereupon the truth broke upon him. "*Thou* art my hiding-place!" Oh, fool and slow of heart to believe! I shall no more seek to hide my sin and myself *from* God; I

shall cast myself upon His breast and hide myself with all my story there, *in* God !

Such is the pith and marrow of Francis Thompson's " The Hound of Heaven."

" THE HOUND OF HEAVEN "

The world of the soul, like the earth which we inhabit, is a sphere. There is a profound sense in which it is true that the further we fly in one direction the nearer we are to coming back by the opposite way. This is the ground of a good man's confidence for the human race, in any time of observed apostasy : " Securus judicat orbis terrarum ! " " The Hound of Heaven " opens with a cry which is the very cry with which Ibsen's " Peer Gynt " closes. " Like a sad and infinite wail of the sea is this coming in, coming home, coming back " : thus Ibsen.

" I fled him down the nights and down the days,
I fled Him down the arches of the years " :

thus Thompson.

From the outset, we know how the

chase is going to end. For obviously this is one of the tender souls—the "royal" natures Plato calls them—who can never be satisfied with half-truths or find peace in the bulkhead or "compartment" way of living. One of those who know that God can save a man only to the uttermost, and that to compound with God, keeping something in reserve, is a fool's game: that, in short, God is not mocked; and that in this region it is all or it is nothing.

You have a hint of all this immediately after the first explosion. The hunted man tells us that all the time he was aware—and he never lost the sense—that the Pursuer was after him for his good. But—and here is a pure piece of Augustine and of St. Paul (cf. Acts ix. 5)—he confesses that at the outset and at any time during the pursuit he was quite prepared to come to terms with God; but always he knew that in dealing with God there must be no talk of terms. For a man to talk of terms with God is to make a

convenience of God, which in turn is to dethrone and to abolish God.

> " For, though I knew His love who followed
> Yet was I sore adread
> Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside."

" Lord, save me from all my sins," cried Augustine ; but he tells us that he added in the ear of God in a parenthesis, " all except one." And God answered the parenthesis, which there and then was the man's very prayer. For God must estimate the quality of our words by noting not what we offer to Him, but what we withhold.

Augustine learned what this soul in painful flight from God will learn—that we are not yet in earnest until we ask Him to come in and take over—everything. Augustine having prayed " Lord save me from all my sins—all except one " ; having prayed, " Lord save me from all my sins—but not quite yet," one day, unable further to endure the misery of this division and dishonour at

the depths of his soul, prayed, " Lord, save me from all my sins, and save me now." Whereupon it was with him as it was with us when learning to swim,—we thought it safe to keep one foot on the ground. But God one day sent a great billow from the ocean into our little bay. Suddenly we were lifted from our feet. Our feet were literally taken from us. We had no choice but to trust God : and, behold ! we found ourselves sustained !

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He tells us how he sought distraction from his insistent seriousness in this and that. But the days were long ; and the nights were longer. He said to the Dawn, " Be sudden," and to the Eve, " Be soon."

" But still within the little children's eyes
Seems something that replies ;
They at least are for me, surely for me !
I turned me to them very wistfully :
But, just as their young eyes grew sudden fair
With dawning answers there
Their angel plucked them from me by the hair."

" I shall find an escape from myself in the innocence of these little children. I shall find in their eyes ' something that replies.' " But, with that sensitiveness which is the price that faith and genius pay for their great wealth, he seemed to see these children shrinking back from him.

Perhaps it was nothing. Perhaps it was simply his own frank confession that if they knew him, they would be afraid. Whatever it was, it was enough.

The poet said, " So be it. There's the sun, and the moon. There is also a wind upon the heath. I shall greet *Nature* lip to lip ! "

"THE HOUND OF HEAVEN"

The Gospel of "Nature"

There are souls of a kind that cannot be comforted or sustained by the mere observation or study of natural processes, whether this be concentrated upon the wonders of the infinitesimal atom or upon the terrible majesty of the stars. "Give me a point to stand upon," said Archimedes, "and I shall move the world." "Show us the Father," said a puzzled disciple on the night in which his Master was betrayed, "Show us the Father and it sufficeth us." "Look up into that vault of heaven," exclaimed Leigh Hunt, on Carlyle's doorstep; "how can you have doubt of God?" "It's a sair sicht!" sighed the other. Both were right; which is to say that both were wrong. To one who has no point of view

which enables him to take up this world as a very little thing, the procession of the stars may be even something of a horror. It is all right when, like the Psalmist, we can think of the blue vault as " Thy heavens " ; but if those heavens belong to nobody (so to speak), a man does well perhaps to steep his senses in forgetfulness. And whether it is well or ill for him to do this he simply will do it. If things at last mean nothing, why then they have been meaning nothing all the time, and stoicism will slip into epicureanism, and this into a later sensuality among the baser sort, and into a later sadness among the finer ones, as sure as fate.

Nature, says Thompson, in this very passage of the poem—every word of which at this precise moment being worthy of our intensest preoccupation—nature simply corroborates the mood with which we happen to confront her. It is a fine thing to see the sun rise in the morning, but only if you are " feeling

fine," or if you are *free to feel fine*. To Sebald, in "Pippa," morning was not morning, even though it was a New Year's morning. To Sebald there and then morning was only "night with a sun added." But the sun does something more than rise; it sets. Now, the faith or view-of-the-world which bases itself upon the rising sun will be shaken to its shallow foundation and will totter at the aspect of approaching night. Certainly this is the persistent protest of the Bible from beginning to end, declared as passionately in the Epistles as in the Psalms —that nature simply corroborates, confirms, illuminates, qualifies one's own final prejudice about life and all things.

A good man once offered us the alleviation of "Natural Law in the Spiritual World." But the fallacy was detected at once in the good man's native land, where it was immediately perceived that if natural law governs the spiritual world, then there is no spiritual world: there is only a natural world more subtle than we had

hoped. But you have all this in the poem—

" I triumphed, and I saddened, with all weather ;
Heaven and I wept together,
And its sweet tears were salt with mortal mine."

The passage closes with the cry :

" Nature, poor step-dame, cannot slake my drouth,
Let her, if she would owe me,
Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky, and *show me The breasts o' her tenderness !* "

I recall George Meredith's rhetorical question, delivered with a flourish, as though it settled the whole matter and made the agonies of the saints ridiculous :

" Into the breast that gave the rose
Shall I with shuddering fall ? "

It is very wonderful what nonsense one can " get across " if he adopts the medium of poetry or fiction ! Consider that chirpy couplet. If nature, indeed, produced nothing but roses, then finally

to sink into a bed of roses and to cease breathing might not demand any deep act of faith. For myself I do not concede even so much ; but let it pass. Nature, however, which does produce roses (her best ones only by the help of man), produces things other than roses. Nature produces the worm which attacks the rose, choosing with a diabolical preference the fairest. So that even in a rose-garden there are grounds for a final uneasiness as to what the whole thing may signify. But nature which produces the rose produces, say, the cobra, the scorpion and the rest. So that were Mr. Meredith to return in the flesh, and were he to ask me—

> " Into the breast which gave the cobra,
> Shall I with shuddering fall ? "

I should have to answer : " Well, now, I must not presume to speak for others ; but for myself, I do confess that I do not like the prospect at all."

" THE HOUND OF HEAVEN "

THE point we had reached was that " Nature " is indifferent or ambiguous. When we put to her our final questions, she answers in effect: " What do *you* think ? " " What would you yourself say ? " Like Leonardo's Monna Lisa, she goes on smiling. At one time the smile conveys to us a sense of the compassion of God; it is the smile of a gracious and understanding Madonna. At another time it is almost hateful, a gesture of leering and contempt. " Nature means nothing ! " Right you are; but that means you are lost ! " Nature means God ! " Right you are again; and now you have your work cut out for you.

There is one way of describing our position in this world: *we have an option*

on life. But they err who regard this as a dead option, one on which they may refuse to give a decision or register their vote. No one is really neutral in his relation to God and the meaning of life. Those who do not vote for God, and who think they may "abstain from voting," have in fact cast their vote on the other side. For the very essence of the God-ward vote is that it leads to action; and not to act is in fact to resist. Life is the Sphinx. You propound your question and look up into her face; she simply looks back at you. William Wordsworth will confess in a hundred passages, in every case with the authenticity of a great happiness: "I have felt a presence which disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts." And Thomas Hardy can give to a small volume of poems, as representing their drift and substance, the sombre and disheartening title: "Time's Laughing Stocks." What then? Why, this only. If Wordsworth and the Idealists are right, we may go on. If Hardy and

the deniers are right, ought we not to bring the sorry business to an end?

* * * *

Finding no refuge in "Nature," the hunted man took to the road again. A change has come over his spirit. It may be that he is simply a wearied, beaten man, and that any faith to which he may now attain is nothing but a form of despair. You may put it in that way if you like.

You may, however, give to this tenderer mood which one now detects a higher and, in fact, a holy interpretation. You may say that God is only now finding a way into the man's most hidden heart. One security after another has had to be shattered before God can come at the man. And when *this* dawns upon him, what remains to him but to stop and turn and cast himself upon the breast of God? All his hard experience, what was it? All his illusions and disillusions, what were they? All the gifts

from the side of life, and then the poignant withdrawals? All the lights, and then the deeper darkness when those lights went out? The touch of the hands of those dear children, their innocent kisses, and then, as it seemed to him, their shrinking back from him as though he were unclean? What were all these? What might they all portend? What might they all *not* portend? That life is an infernal mockery and affront? Or that life beneath the surface is a secret way between the soul and God? Which? If human existence is finally capable of two solutions—one that makes for death and one that makes for life—which of these two must be embraced as truth by man?

"Ah! must—
Designer infinite!—
Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn with it?"

I see what it is that all through life I have been seeking. I have been seeking love. I had glimpses of it in the touch of

those dear children's hands, and in their innocent kisses. But surely they shrank from me ; or was it I who confessed that they would be justified in shrinking from me ? Was it that I felt they would shrink from me did they know me as I know myself ? Nature, too ! She smiled when I smiled ; but as often as I lost my way she seemed to have lost her way or not to know of " ways." I see. I see quite clearly. I am seeking someone who shall love me, even when he knows me. I am seeking someone who shall love me *because* he knows me. If he knows me he must have known me all the time. If he is ready to love me now he must have loved me from the beginning ; before the beginning, from all eternity : my God !

" My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me,
And smitten me *to my knee*."

"A FALLEN YEW"

Let us attempt a paraphrase of this poem. In my own deliberate judgment "A Fallen Yew" is Thompson's deepest utterance. It looks a difficult poem; but here as everywhere "light is sown for the righteous." If we knock and knock the door seems to open sufficiently. Meanwhile I should like to do with my readers for their guidance what I do for my own sake when I first encounter a poem which looks difficult and elusive. I read it right through to the end, thankful for anything I can get out of it; and it is very wonderful how, looking backwards from the conclusion to the source, we can see the general line or drift of something which as we struggled through it seemed merely useless and perverse. The incident which let loose the poem was the sight of "A

Fallen Yew." There it lay, hacked to death, and now awaiting its further career as *wood* for this and that! But is that all? Is there nothing more to be said or imagined or predicted or conceived of such a system of organised life as that yew-tree was? The planting of it, away back in the mists of time! The love with which at the beginning it was committed to the soil and given its chance to live! The showers which nourished its life! The sun which invited its leaves! The daylight which through those leaves it drunk in, thrilling its sap to the very roots! And not the daylight only, but by night the light of the moon and the light of the stars! Its joyousness in spring! Its patience and hardihood in winter! The long test of years and generations! All these things! And yet now it lies a log of dull wood! Is that the end of the yew tree as a tree? Never! For

"It seemed corrival of the world's great prime,
Made to un-edge the scythe of Time
And last with stateliest rhyme."

We should say that a great poem was as eternal as the hills, "a monument more lasting than brass." Thompson says that this yew tree—a material thing—seemed to be as lasting as a poem—a thing of the spirit. Looking at its wrinkled trunk one would have said that it had accompanied this world from the beginning of time, and had first burgeoned in Paradise. Looking at that same old withered trunk, and at those branches which year by year were flooded with God's wine until they overflowed in leaves, one might have supposed that it would outlast this world itself. One would have said that this tree would have "puffed out the stars" and "seen the world to bed."

Elsewhere Thompson has a true and exquisite simile of the lighting of the stars in the evening sky: how it is like a servitor in some cathedral going about the building in the deepening dusk, lighting taper after taper. Here he uses the same metaphor conversely and suggests such a

servitor going about the darkened world on the last day—when man's brief hour of service here is done, "puffing out," blowing out with his breath, one star after another until the whole hêaven is dark and still and cold.

One would have declared, looking at that yew-tree, that *it* would be there to see the last star go out. And yet there it lies, beaten to all appearance, and overcome, cut off from the destiny of which it was capable, by an accident or by the stroke of man! Once again, can that be the end of a living thing? And, once again, he declares Never!

And so as its "shade"—the spirit which unified the tree and gave it its inmost coherence and personality—hies away to the shipyards of Lethe or of Acheron in the land of gloomy Dis, the memory of all that it was comes back upon the poet, kindling sacred fancies and imaginings which must have some substance in them, or all is finally in vain.

He confesses that

> " Stirred by its fall
> Its life reads saddenedly."

If this be indeed the end of everything for that tree, well might we say that much travail had been vain. But this is not the end—even of a tree !

"A FALLEN YEW"

WHAT gives the poet's musings their haunting power is—that we know he is really not thinking of trees—when they are cut down or when they die. He is thinking of man and what happens to a man when he is cut down or when he dies. If death is the end of all, then everything that led up to such an end had already the quality of death. If such an end is held by us to be sad, then all the way that led to it must be held to be sad. "Spelt backward from its death," the life-story of every thing that has lived and flourished is finally a chilling, saddening story.

True, in the course of its long life the yew had been a playground to young boys, permitting them to frolic beneath and amongst the branches! True, those branches had sheltered birds, and had

given them leafy crannies in which they lived and loved and reared their brood. And you might say that *that* was the tree's real immortality—she had been a nurse and means of life and of fuller life for boys and birds. But once again, what of the tree herself? Has she no proper immortality, no immortality of her own as herself one and whole? For (and here is the true heart of the poem) the tree had indisputably a life of her own! Those birds and boys who played among her branches—what did they know of the tree's essential life? Is not the very basis of life something for ever incommunicable, something which is a mystery to itself and remains a mystery? Between two human souls, however dearly linked in life, there is what he calls a whole "God's breadth" separating them, or, as we might say, defending the personality of each.

"The sweetest wife on sweetest marriage-day—
Their souls at grapple in mid-way,
Sweet to her sweet may say:

' I take you to my inmost heart, my true ! '
Ah, fool ! but there is one heart you
Shall never take him to ! "

There is an innermost fort which still resists the invader when all the town has yielded. There is a port whose harbour-bar no ship can break coming in from the sea. There is an inmost cell of the soul, whose gates and bars are deaf and hard to all the subtleties of love. There is a final you of you, which holds you its prisoner eternally, and from that prison which holds your final and essential life you can be liberated only by God at whose cincture hangs the key.

* * * *

For myself, one of the high influences of Francis Thompson is to leave with me, food for my imagination for ever, some " picture " of truth. For I thank anyone who helps me, not only to believe my beliefs, but also to imagine them. Here, then, is another of his suggestions which once perceived haunt the spirit it

may be for ever. There is an inmost core of our personality which even we ourselves have not the power to divulge completely. It is something so deep and central that you might even say of it that it is not there until it is evoked. And it is not evoked until God draws near. There is a something about each one of us so inward and subconscious that we cannot say of it that we possess it, or have the power to handle it. It is so deeply ourselves that one can never get to a point within himself where he can see it and say of it, "that is me," the true "me" of me. There is a something within us (to try once again to express ourselves) which may be said to come into being only at the approach of God.

* * * *

It was, we are told, Coventry Patmore who taught Thompson the deep and solving idea that the final thing in the human soul is not that it is alone, but that it is in eternal fellowship; that we

have each one of us one final companion, and that final companion is God. That man is a duality. That man is not a "thing in himself." That he is a relationship. That his soul is, you might say, a state of tension between his conscious being and another. In short, that he lives and moves and has his being in God. The unit of the human race is not a person, it is that person's communion with another. "Every man," says Tolstoy, "in the depths of his soul has something he alone apprehends, namely, his attitude to God."

> "Its keys are at the cincture hung of God;
> Its gates are trepidant to His nod,
> By Him its floors are trod.
> And if His feet shall rock those floors in wrath,
> Or blest aspersion sleek His path
> Is only choice it hath."

The only choice, the only realm of freedom, in this world where law rules from an atom to a cluster of stars, is here —it is for us, one by one, to say whether

outside that inmost sanctuary of our life the feet of God shall shake the floor of Heaven in wrath or His hands shall scatter incense in benediction.

"ODE TO THE SETTING SUN"

"Like Him thou hang'st in dreadful pomp of blood
Upon Thy western rood . . ."

It is in a poem like the "Ode to the Setting Sun" that Francis Thompson separates himself from all mere poets of "Nature." It is in a poem like this that one finds proof of his own claim to be the poet "not of the return to Nature, but of the return to God." And by "God" the poet means not merely the name for something for ever beyond our powers to apprehend, concerning which we think we have gone as far as we dare by giving to it Personality. The great Christian poets have gone beyond Plato, who, according to Coleridge, put his hand upon the breast of Nature and missed her breathing. We may open

our Wordsworth or our Tennyson anywhere and find some glowing passage which makes the great venture—that in all and through all and over all there is something, and because that something moves us we dare to say that it "lives and knows." But Thompson takes all that in his stride, and reaches stricter terms. He begins where Wordsworth ends, where even Robert Browning frequently ends. Wordsworth, in "Lines Written above Tintern Abbey," comes upon "a Presence which disturbs us with the joy Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime, Of something far more deeply interfused." And there he comes to rest—in wonder, perhaps you might say, in faith. Thompson having arrived there, *proceeds*; reckoning indeed that if there be even so much as a Presence, a something, then we must have the courage of our feelings, the faith born of our tragic human necessity, and with a leap in the light make the great hazard and reach the great peace of the Christian Faith—that

that Presence is none other than God, and He the very God from whom Christ came, to whom Christ returned, with whom Christ is for evermore. Wordsworth comes to rest in wonder : Thompson in adoration and confession.

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The setting sun has been a theme for all poets : a setting sun indeed has touched us all to poetry. And little wonder ! The slow passing of the great orb which brings us light and warmth ! The weird hour of twilight ! Then darkness and the stars ! It is a thing not to be wondered at, that from the time when man lifted up his head, he was puzzled, moved, terrified by this aspect of his dwelling-place. And later, when by long habit he had learned not to be afraid of a world over which the sun seemed always doomed to set, this daily passing away of a radiant thing would begin to assuage his own grief or bitterness, compelled as he was to see things pass which had become dear to him. Whereupon he would move on

to something approaching Faith, as he reflected that the sun which sets rises also. In those dim times there may have been debates as to which hour of the day gave the final truth about this life of ours: shall we say that the sun rises only that it may set, or shall we say the sun sets only that it may rise again? You might still divide mankind by that same inquiry.

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Again and again in these studies we have said that "Nature is indifferent," that she will simply corroborate your own spiritual intention. If you will have it that the characteristic thing about the sun is that it sets, and if you will build up your universe upon that—in a sense, no one can hinder you. But, on the other hand, if you will have it that the characteristic thing about the sun is that it rises, that it cannot be holden of the darkness—once again, there is no one who has the logical right to hinder you. And

so, we might say, not to go too deeply into the matter, that the faith-view and the sad-view are equally defensible—on the evidence of "Nature," and on the purely intellectual plane. But life is not lived on the purely intellectual plane. Perhaps man had achieved the greater part of his wisdom *before* the critical faculty arose within him. The fact is, we are here, and it is too late to raise the question of the final worth of life. Any theory of things which disheartens us face to face with life, any view which mocks us or insinuates that "not to be" were better, we shall do well to pronounce *bad*. The criterion of truth—at least, so I feel to-day—is not mere self-consistency. If it be consistency it must be a consistency between all that may be alleged on the one hand and our own instinct to live on the other. Now the point of view that the sun sets to rise again, is the point of view which ministers to life.

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There for the most part the Victorian

idealists were content to rest. There Francis Thompson rests also, but never for more than a moment. He proceeds and does not rest until he can say with his heart and mind aglow :

" Even so, O Cross ! thine is the victory,
Thy roots are fast within our fairest fields."

"ODE TO THE SETTING SUN"

THE poem is divided into three portions—a Prelude, the Ode, and an After Strain. The poet's total message is to be found not in the one, or the other, or the third, but in the total effect which the entire poem is calculated to have upon us. Things are what they are to us, and what they are to us depends almost altogether upon the mood, the circumstances without and in the soul with which we confront things. There is great art in knowing *where* to put our questions, and *when*. I must not ask my questions about life, when for some reason I myself am unhappy, or bitter, or afraid. There and then my first business is with myself, to harness in my spirit. And so all true prayer begins with Adoration and Thanksgiving. Only when

we have become sure of God is it safe for us to indulge ourselves with questions.

The Psalmist knew this also who confides to us that he went to God's temple to "enquire." There are certain places where alone we should put certain questions. And the wonderful thing about such places is that once there and the spirit of them upon us we often forget to ask our questions. That may be part of God's strategy. It may very well be that there are no final answers to life's real questions. It may only be that God Himself can so deal with us that we cease to wish to ask Him anything—certainly anything querulous, or angry, or personal. "In that day ye shall ask Me nothing": you will be satisfied with merely being where you are, and seeing what you see, and having what you have. This may be the reason why we say that a thing is "solved by walking"—*solvitur ambutando*. You cannot walk without, for one thing, getting

away—away from the thing that is troubling you. And for another thing, you cannot walk without getting somewhere and without seeing certain things by the way. And this somewhere that you arrive at, and those things which you may meet by the way—at any street-corner—why, they may let loose within you feelings, hopes, better desires, a sense of shame and anger at yourself—in all of which you cease to chafe your own wound by thinking upon it, and find yourself "whole!" There are "questions" which I presume to put to God about life when I am by myself and when I have worked myself up into a mood of self-pity, questions which I should never put, and which I should be ashamed that I ever thought of putting, say, in the ward of a sick children's hospital, or were I able to peep into the theatre when a surgeon is at work!

Here, in this poem, as in all great poems, the Prelude decides everything; for in the Prelude we have the faith,

the insight which the poet cannot but impose upon everything he sees.

* * * *

The poem was written in 1888 at Storrington, where Thompson was taking a " Retreat." In a field or grassy court-yard about the monastery a Cross is raised. That evening, as the poet was musing, following the curve of the sinking sun, he saw that Cross lit up. The setting sun seemed in dying to gaze upon the Cross. It came home to the poet that what he was seeing was life in all its natural frailty and transitoriness looking to God ; and this not angrily, not desperately, but gratefully and in hope. For his own soul had been attuned to gentle interpretations. Somewhere near by there was music—a violin, a harp, a flute. We learn from another poet that

" Just when we're safest there's a sunset touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, someone's death,
A chorus ending from Euripides, and that's
enough ! "

So here, the music, the evening air

" quiet as a nun, breathless with adoration," the man's own condition ailing and suppliant—all conspired to enable his soul to adopt with a new and happy passion the faith of the Son of God in Sacrifice.

He condoles with the sun, that no longer does he receive the worship of mankind ; that now is he permitted to set as though it were all a fated and insignificant thing—no longer the deliberate action of a God.

And yet here am I, and as I look at thee I am aware of something in my soul,

> " For worship it is too incredulous,
> For doubt—oh, too believing-passionate ! "

What is this feeling which, let loose by thee, has mastered and softened me ?

> " What wild divinity makes my heart thus,
> A fount of most baptismal tears ? "

I follow that line of light which, like a very finger of God, is pointing at this world. And pointing at what in particular ? " Thy straight long beam lies steady on the Cross. Ah me ! "

"ODE TO THE SETTING SUN"

" . . . . Thy straight
Long beam lies steady on the Cross."

The last ray of the setting sun Thompson sees pointing like a finger at the Cross! And suddenly the poet asks, concerning nature, life, everything, "Is *that* what is meant by dying?" As a man sinking down into the sleep of death might, as his last conscious act, point to something ere he dies, unable to speak, but putting into that last gesture the whole intention of his soul—its despair of things and its hope in God—so the dying sun seems to be saying: "Before I die, once more I adjure the sons of men that there in that Cross is the only clue to life!" "There is first that which is natural, and afterwards that which is spiritual!" The natural aspect of things, that is the

"Alpha"; the deeper significance of things, that is the "Omega." There is more truth for man in the hour of his apparent defeat than in the hour of his secular triumph. Even were there no morrow and no fresh uprising, we should have to confess of the "Sun" that at sunset and in his passing he acquires the circumstances of his utmost glory. "It is expedient for you that I go away," said Jesus to His puzzled followers; and they lived to assent to that hard saying. For, like Moses, we can see God only after He has passed by. We know the value of things and our own need of them, not when we have them, but when we lose them. We estimate their weight by the heaviness of our hearts when they are gone from us.

Who celebrates the rising of the sun as he ought to? Do we not take the daily miracle as a casual and insignificant thing? Or we look up at the starry sky, and note with an easy mind that "all things remain as they were from the

foundation of the world." *But let one star die!* As we gaze upwards, or short of that as we walk with our eyes upon the earth thinking of nothing, let one star fall from its place as it burns and goes out in dust, let it trail its light across the heavens —and in a moment we are quickened. Or we look out upon a quiet sea, not aware as we look of its lurking passion. But let us walk by the edge of great cliffs; let us hear its booming as some long-travelled wave completes its journey and "breaks like a bursting heart and dies in foam"—and once again we begin to know the sea and to feel in our own souls something akin.

> "It is the breaking wave that hath the might,
> The passing shower that rainbows maniple."

The poet recalls the honours that were paid to the sun in the primitive life of man. Later knowledge indeed has by some foolish and unnecessary process deprived many hearts of their instinct to worship God for the sun's sake. We

have allowed our knowledge of processes to rob us of wonder. Our "ologies" and "onomies" have been indeed each a passing bell that signifies some faith's about to die. And yet those very things which science has taught us about this wonderful servant of God —the sun—ought to heighten our wonder and gratitude. To the sun we owe our coalfields, so that all the cheer of kindling fires on wintry nights is to be traced to its patient and unheeded charity.

And now, on this bank and shoal of later time, where is this instinct of the sons of man to clothe it with gratitude and adoration! Here are we disillusioned by knowledge, deprived of the "old essential candours." Once upon a time we had those high feelings of wonder and gratitude and mystery: and man can never consent to be less than he was. Still we have our "longings of immortal pain." We cannot see the sun set without feeling something—if only we would not crowd out this feeling with

trivial things. We cannot look upon a rose with a reflective eye if at the moment we ourselves are suffering, without " taking the wings of the morning and flying to the uttermost parts."

It is at this point of the poet's musings that a shaft of light leaps from the scabbard of a cloud-bank like a sword and touches the Cross on the lawn at Storrington. Whereupon

> " A rifting light in me
> Burns through the leaden broodings of the mind."

The sun itself takes on an awesome aspect. In the great river of light which the Western sky has become for the poet, he sees the sun like " a Head in Blood " ; and the long horizon line forms a " cross-bar of a mighty Cross." Nature has achieved for one moment the aspect of Calvary !

"A JUDGMENT IN HEAVEN"

THOSE who may wish to have by heart something of Francis Thompson which is characteristic, could not do better than commit to memory the Epilogue to "A Judgment in Heaven." For in the fifty lines of that Epilogue one has all the "notes" of Thompson; so that one knowing these with his mind and with his heart will find himself able to unlock the poet's more guarded treasures. Above everything, we have in this poem his great charity, a charity which as we hear it from his lips takes us in spirit back through twenty centuries and away to Galilee!

The general drift of the entire poem —in the region of morals—is that we must not judge one another. The poet might have used as caption for this poem

the familiar couplet of Robert Burns, counselling us all at the judgment to "stand mute." Another conclusion in morals, or, rather, in theology, the poet has the daring to announce. We often say, "Grant that in the end of the days the Judge of all the earth may turn His eyes away from this and that, and judge us by some human standard." The poet prays rather that in the end of the days the Judge of all the earth shall judge us not with *our* eyes, which are so short-sighted, so hot with prejudice, so blinded with passion, so tired with the immediate aspects of things. Grant rather that He judge us not with our eyes but with His own!

> Is it, if Heaven the future showed,
> Is it the all-severest mode
> To see ourselves with the eyes of God?
> God rather grant, at His assize
> He see us not with our own eyes!

Taking poetry to be the story of what a sensitive man makes of life, Francis Thompson in "A Judgment of Heaven"

describes an occasion when two poets came into the presence of God and all His angels. One had been but the gentle Rhymer of a day. The other had been on earth a poet of the great order, one of those doomed to suffering and inner torment, who, if he is to see the final light of faith, must confront in his own soul the darkness of this world. For we might say of the great poets, a Job, an Æschylus, a Dante, a Shakespeare, a Milton, that the stars which shine for them are not the stars of our northern latitudes, such as a man may behold by lifting up his eyes. The stars which shine for genius are the stars which they perceive by *looking down and through* life to the other side ; even as, had we common folks the power to pierce this solid earth, we should see the sky of the Antipodes and shining there the constellation of the Southern Cross.

* * * *

A deep soul and a simple soul stand

before God. In the Holy Presence, the deep tragic poet who came upon his truth by the way of experience, by the way of revolt and experiment and defeat, is bowed with shame over his poor sad use of life. The quiet and tame Rhymer of a day, on the other hand, is equally ashamed of the poor thing he has found in life—the deep things he has missed, the cheap and insignificant language which was all that he had ever come to need.

Aware of the life-history of the one and of the other, the angels took the side of the prudent Rhymer, who had not defiled his flesh. But there were two spirits amongst the angelic host, who thought differently and judged differently. Both were women : " Sinless Mary and Sinful Mary ! " One the mother of Jesus, the other the Magdalene.

" Turn your robe ! " spake the Magdalene to the downcast poet ; and, to the surrounding angels, " See now and feel." They felt the *inner* side of the great poet's robe, and behold it was soft

and wet with blood! "Take off the chaplet!" They took it off and stood "astonished"; for, feeling it, behold every leaf as they pressed it burst and bled!

Meanwhile the Father, looking on, lifted up His voice and spake:

"Fetch forth the Paradisal garb!"
Spake the Father, sweet and low;
Drew them both by the frightened hand,
Where Mary's throne made irised bow—
"Take, Princess Mary, of thy good grace,
Two spirits greater than they know."

If the entire Prologue is too long for some of us nowadays to acquire for ever, perhaps the lines which follow might come home to us and remain:

"Some may perchance with strange surprise
Have blundered into Paradise.
In vasty dusk of life abroad,
They fondly thought to err from God,
Nor knew the circle that they trod;
And, wandering all the night about,
Found them at dawn where they set out.
Death dawned; heaven lay in prospect wide—
Lo! they were standing by His side!"

"WHERETO ART THOU COME?"

A PRECIOUS volume of the poet is still lacking: it would contain only his short poems. There are poems of Thompson's which have that sense of having been uttered in one long breath, which in my own view is the mark of a true sonnet. In any such collection a place would have to be found for "Whereto art thou come?"

In gathering together the materials for my own little "Golden Book" I had not the temerity to take everything. But perhaps the same kind owners of copyright will further indulge their charity so that I may print the poem here.

"WHERETO ART THOU COME?"

"'Friend, whereto art thou come?' Thus Verity:
Of each that to the world's sad Olivet

Comes with no multitude, but alone by night,
Lit with the one torch of his lifted soul,
Seeking her that he may lay hands on her ;
Thus : and waits answer from the mouth of deed.
Truth is a maid whom men woo diversely,
This, as a spouse ; that, as a light-o'-love,
To know and, having known, to make his brag.
But woe to him that takes the immortal kiss,
And not estates her in his housing life,
Mother of all his seed ! So he betrays,
Not Truth, the unbetrayable, but himself :
And with his kiss's rated traitor-craft
The Hakeldama of a plot of days
He buys, to consummate his Judasry
Therein with Judas's guerdon of despair."

It is a warning against mere "meddling with Truth." The metaphor which Thompson uses is a familiar one in Holy Scripture, and forms the background of the whole of Hosea and of much in Jeremiah. There is the true marriage of the soul with Truth—a pledge taken and received "from this time forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until God separates by death": (a thing He will never do !). And there

is the unprincipled pursuit of sensation in the region of the heart and mind.

> " Truth is a maid whom men woo diversely,
> This, as a spouse ; that, as a light-o'-love."

He degrades Truth who sees her even for an instant and goes his way forgetting. It was his duty to embody that moment's insight or ecstasy into his later life-scheme ; and to reject as untrue, as false to his own highest moment, any proposed life or understanding of our position in this world which did not leave room for and honour that most personal and, at the moment, illuminating experience. It was his duty to " marry the maid " and to stand by her and by their children of the spirit to the end.

* * * *

The poet pursues the further career, not of the honourable soul which kisses the maid and henceforward considers itself betrothed. He pursues the other, who took truth as a light-o'-love ; who

trifled with serious things; who later might even say: "Oh, yes, I also tried that! I also once upon a time thought as you now think! I also have had my lyrical hour, my great moment!' But—it passed. I conclude that '*it came to pass*,' as the phrase is. For me also once upon a time a light arose; but it died down, quenched in the great waters!" To whom the poet retorts: "Not so! It was not the light that failed; it was you who failed." In fact, *there* is the point. We lose truth not by further knowledge, but by private treachery. It may have been for this reason that Dante places the *treacherous* in the last cockpit of Hell. It is for this reason that the Epistle to the Hebrews says some things so unbending about people who have tasted the good gift of God (the poet's "*who have kissed the maid*") and have fallen away—so unbending and grave that we do not like to quote them. A man, says the poet, who is unfaithful in that which is least will be unfaithful

in that which is greatest. His will be, in secret, a rake's progress—except he repent " *and do the first* works."

Compare Thompson's closing lines in this poem with Browning's lines at the close of " Caponsacchi's " speech. It is the same insight. In the one case and in the other it is the downward career of one who has trifled with truth, and has trampled upon the face of some protesting vision. Caponsacchi suggests to the Pope that they should all leave Guido alone. They should let him slip, slide, slidder down the moral slopes of life until he finds himself quite alone, except for one other—Judas !

" There let them grapple, denizens o' the dark,
Foes or friends, but indissolubly bound
In their one spot out of the ken of God
Or care of man, for ever and ever more ! "

"AT LORD'S"

THERE are not many who need to be informed that "Lord's" is a cricket-field. It is to cricket what the old course at St. Andrews is to golf. There one may see the giants. Every Lancashire lad grows up with cricket, as a Fife lad with golf. If one were to allow oneself to become sententious, one might even thank God that Lancashire has always had cricket to fall back upon. We are poor judges of the joys of others: Stevenson in the greatest of all his essays, "The Lantern Bearers," has said everything that is to be said upon that subject. How wrong-headed, and how insolent it may be for us to say on what terms others shall be happy! It is here that romanticism and Christianity exchange a knowing look. How can a human being be happy

in these circumstances or in those? So we hear people ask, not suspecting how cruel their words may sound, and how, were we to concede their point, it would be to sell the pass and to "offend against the generation of God's children." For as Dostoievsky put it at the Puschkin celebration, "the poor say to us 'you shall love us not for what you would like us to be, and not as you would like to see us situated: you shall love us for what we are, here and now, or not at all!'"

You might arrive in a Lancashire town on a dreary day and ask yourself how people can be human and cheerful and given to humour and hospitality, in such surroundings and under such skies. And you would be talking nonsense, and indeed would be on the edge of sinful speech. "For the life is more than meat, and the body is more than raiment."

"How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" I doubt if we can sing the Lord's song elsewhere. It is the affront to the spirit dealt to us by

life which leads us to break forth into song. Certainly life has been cursed not by the truly unfortunate but by the idle dull ones of the earth. And life has been blessed for the most part by those who have been called upon to endure much hardness. "It is expedient for you that I go away," said Jesus to His disciples. For, what we miss on earth, we look for elsewhere; and if we look and look, asking, seeking, knocking, a door will open for us in heaven.

* * * *

Short of this, but on the same great highway, Lancashire has the unworldly interest of cricket. Once again, Thompson was a Lancashire man. His boyhood doubtless had been sustained in its capacity for admiration by early loyalties to great cricketers. This one might be a rich man, and that one a mighty man of letters, but in the scheme of values of a healthy boy, what is it to be rich or to write books compared with the prestige of a Grace or a Hobbs!

But lovers as we may be of a game, and deep in its lore, our lot may be cast upon such a sad day that we have not the heart to take leisure from our grief or shame.

Thompson, on such a day, wrote his poignant little poem " At Lord's."

He had seen a game advertised: " Lancashire *versus* ——." Would he go? Yes! surely it would be a fine thing to recapture the thrills and suspenses of those early days! But no! Why should I sadden myself, laying open old wounds? Even were I to go to Lord's to see my " red-crested " heroes bat and bowl and field, I should find myself gazing on other scenes through my tears. It would not be the actual players I should see. What I should be seeing would be ghosts! I should see a ghost wielding a bat, standing up to the bowling of another ghost: and the thing would take on for ever a sad significance. I should begin to see it all as a sombre transcript of this life of ours! For what

is a life but an issue between a bowler (called death) and a batsman? And as I looked about me it would not be a host of living men that I should see. They also would be ghosts. No! I shall not go to Lord's. I shall not rub my wounds until they bleed!

"It is little I repair to the matches of the
Southron folk,
Though my own red roses there may blow;
It is little I repair to the matches of the
Southron folk,
Though the red roses crest the caps, I know.

For the field is full of shades as I near the
shadowy coast,
And a ghostly batsman plays to the bowling of
a ghost,
And I look through my tears on a soundless
clapping host,
As the run-stealers flicker to and fro—to and
fro;—
O my Hornby and my Barlow long ago!"

WORDS IN CLOSING

TURNING over these pages on "Francis Thompson" I am quite sad and angry with myself for the poor use I have made of my time and space. On every page as I glance over them, things old and new leap to my eye, each one of them demanding of me the reason for my neglect. And indeed it will be a most partial account of the poet which my readers shall have taken away with them—unless they qualify and supplement and lighten my report with their own reading and reflection. Even the little "Golden Book of Francis Thompson" will do something to restore the balance between Thompson's total gift to us and my own report of it.

Particularly would I commend to readers, who when they are quite frank with themselves confess that they have

but little interest in long stretches of poetry, that they acquaint themselves with some of the shorter poems. If they will even go so far as to commit to memory some of the short extracts which I have torn from their context, the very sound and rhythm of them will tune their hearts and kindle within them a deeper interest.

* * * *

Of Thompson, as of Robert Browning and the Romantic poets generally, it is true that nothing will arouse our heart to lay hold on them, nothing but a personal experience. One must have been in love, fortunately or disastrously, before one has the hearing ear or the understanding heart for poets of this class. For it is their genius to lay hold upon delicate lights and shadows, exquisite moments of tension and moments equally exquisite of solution—delicate and exquisite things to which even ordinary people are liable. Left to themselves, indeed, ordinary people

might never have been so aware of them as to wish to reflect upon them. Therefore there are those who deprecate this entire field of interest as pandering disproportionately to a sentimentality in human beings which all too easily may get out of hand. Upon such objectors the Romanticists simply retort that they " are finished and finite clods, untroubled by a spark."

* * * *

There will always be those who, caught in that travail of the soul to which sentiment introduces us, will insist upon seeing, in the ups and downs of their life under the sway of sentiment, the hint of principles and of presences and of a final issue which to the cold reason seem illogical and, in the strict sense of the word, superstitious—that is to say, top-heavy. It may be that we must leave it at that : " The heart has its own reasons."

Hosea, in the Old Testament, as he watched the flames sink down on his

domestic hearth, suddenly saw the face of God. And, in the New Testament, there is many a pledge to those whom life has cheated that, on a basis of broken things, Christ can make a new man, even as at the beginning God made man out of the dust.

On the one hand :

" Our towers are copied fragments from our breast ;
And all man's Babylons strive but to impart
The grandeurs of his Babylonian heart."

And on the other :

" The angels keep their ancient places—
Turn but a stone, and start a wing !
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangëd faces
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry ; and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder,
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my soul, my daughter,
Cry ; clinging Heaven by the hems ;
And lo, Christ walking on the water,
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames ! "

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